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FOR NEA/FO - WELCH AND GRAY; NEA/MAG - HOPKINS AND HARRIS
NSC FOR YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/11/2018

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIANS REPORTEDLY TAKEN HOSTAGE IN TUNISIA:
MORE INFORMATION FROM AUSTRIAN AMBASSADOR, MILITARY SOURCE

REF: TUNIS 227

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a March 11 telephone conversation with the Ambassador, the Austrian Ambassador reported that GOT officials had said the Tunisian military continues to conduct air and land search operations for the two Austrian tourists whom al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb claimed to have taken hostage (reftel). Other information the GOT provided to the Austrian Ambassador simply echoed the information publicly released in the Tunisia-Africa Press Agency statement, i.e., that there was no confirmation that the Austrians had been captured on Tunisian soil, or that if they had been captured, they remained in Tunisia (reftel). Referring to the fact that AQIM had mentioned the couple's passport numbers, the Austrian Ambassador noted that even the couple's passport data could have been gleaned from public sources. He also relayed reports he had heard indicating that the Austrian hostages are now being held in Mali.

¶2. (C) In a conversation with the DATT, a senior officer in the Directorate General of Military Security indicated that the Tunisian military had been conducting search operations for the Austrian tourists since March 5, when they first learned of the couple's disappearance. He said that the military only learned that the disappearance could be a hostage situation on March 10, when al-Jazeera carried the AQIM statement. This officer said that prior to the Austrian couple's disappearance, they had been traveling in a closed military zone, which requires a permit, but that there was no indication that a permit had been applied for or approved.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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